

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE ISLAMIC CONCEPT OF THE HEART AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH MAN'S INTENTION/ACTIONS

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Abstract:

In Islam the heart is viewed as the essence of man. This is due to the fact that it occupies a great and lofty position in the spiritual development of man; the place to which God looks and the storehouse for tawhid, faith and sincerity. In actual fact, actions in Islam are distinguished with respect to their excellence in the sight of Allah in accordance with the condition of the heart. In spite of its lofty position, it was discovered that Muslims, especially in the contemporary period have lost the understanding of the importance of the role of the heart. Their focus is generally on actions or beliefs with little regards for the intention. It is in the light of the above that this paper attempts to increase Muslims' understanding on the role of the heart in the psychological and development of man, and also to emphasize the relationship that exists between it and intention/actions of man. This has been carried out from the Islamic perspective using the Qur'an and sunnah as framework.

Key Words: Islamic concept, man's interactions

Introduction

The teachings of Islam have such depth and vastness that it views the heart beyond the physical organ; within Islam, the role of the heart cannot be understated. It is a spiritual heart that contains the deeper intelligence and wisdom. It holds the Divine spark or spirit within every human being. In the Holy Qur'an, the heart is referred to as the processor of information, particularly concerning sincerity. This reference to the heart as such attracts attention to the relationship between the heart and intention. In other words, the goal of this paper is to make the believers develop a heart that is sincere, loving and compassionate, and to develop the heart's intelligence. The paper starts by giving a conceptual and contextual analysis of the heart, highlighting its importance to the gross personality traits of man. It thereafter examines the types of heart and its connection to the soul; remedy for defective hearts and the relationship that exists between the heart and intention/action of man and then the conclusion.

Conceptual and Contextual Analysis of the Heart

The heart has been variously defined and described by scholars in reference to different context. In basic anatomy, the heart is defined as a hollow muscular organ in vertebrates that pumps blood received from the veins into the arteries, thereby maintaining the flow of blood through the entire circulatory system.¹ It is also described as the vital center and source of one's being, emotions and sensibilities. The repository of one's deepest and sincerest feeling and beliefs; the seat of the intellect or imagination. It has the capacity for sympathy, generosity, compassion, love and affection, courage, resolution and fortitude.²

In Islamic framework, the term heart is known in Arabic as al-Qalb which is derived from the root word qalaba which denotes "to turn around", "turn about", "to change", "alter", "transform", "transmute" etc.³ The heart thus refers to something changing quickly. In reference to the changing nature of the heart (al-Qalb), the Prophet is reported to have said:

The heart (al-Qalb) takes its name from its constant changes (taqallub). The heart is like a feather at the root of a tree, being turned over and over by the wind.⁴

Al-Ghazali in *Ihya' Ulumi 'd-din* points out that the heart (al-Qalb) denotes two things: the physical heart and the spiritual heart. He therefore mentions that the spiritual heart is the essence of man. It contains the deeper intelligence and wisdom and it is the potential seat of God's illumination. As such, the spiritual heart should be kept sound and healthy for the physical body to operate optionally.⁵

However, the overall Islamic conception of the heart (al-Qalb) does not portray it only as merely a muscular organ that pumps blood throughout the body or mere affection and emotions. It views the heart as the seat of intellectual and cognitive faculties and understanding, volition and intention. It is a 'super-sensory organ' that is cognizant of metaphysical truths. The heart plays a significant role in human psychology as well as spiritual development.⁶ It suffices to say that, if the heart is sound, the rest of the body will be sound and the actions of the body will be pure. The Prophet says:

In the body, there is a morsel of flesh which, if it is sound, all the body is sound and which, if it is diseased all of the body is diseased. This part of the body is the heart.⁷

The above Prophetic tradition underlines the fact that the spiritual heart can become unhealthy with various diseases like lust, anger, jealousy, hatred etc. This is because the spiritual heart functions in a similar manner as the physical heart. Just as the physical heart supplies blood to the body, the spiritual heart nourishes the soul with wisdom and spiritual light and it also purifies the gross personality traits.⁸ Therefore, when the physical heart is diseased the entire body suffers and when the spiritual heart is diseased the soul suffers.

In other words, the important role the heart plays in the personality of man lies in the fact that it is the foundation, i.e. the owner of the limbs, and so the limbs are its soldiers. So, when the owner becomes purified its soldiers become purified, and when it becomes impure then its soldiers become impure. Expatiating on this, Zarabozo in Aisha writes:

The rest of the limbs are subservient to and obey the heart. The heart is the commander and the limbs are the soldiers. Therefore, if the heart is good, the 'soldiers' and their acts are good and if the heart is evil, the 'soldiers' and their acts are evil. If the heart is completely pure it will contain only love for Allah, love for the things that Allah loves, fear of Allah and fear of engaging something that Allah hates. Such a heart will abstain from all the forbidden acts and will also abstain from the ambiguous matters out of fear that they are forbidden. If the heart is greatly evil, it will follow its own desires and it will perform the acts that it loves regardless of whether Allah loves those acts or not.⁹

Lending credence to the above assertion, al-Asqalani also writes in *Ibn Taimiyyah*:

The heart has been singled out for this because it is the leader of the body, and through the purification of the leader the subjects become purified, and with his corruption they become corrupted...¹⁰

The heart is mentioned several times in the Qur'an either in reference to itself or to the chest that contains it.¹¹ For example, the capacity of the heart to reason and understand is expressed in several Qur'anic passages such as:

So have they not travelled through the land, and have they hearts wherewith to understand and ears wherewith to hear?" verily, it is not the eyes that grow blind, but it is the hearts which are in the breasts that grow blind. (Qur'an 22:46)

And we have created for Hell many of the jinn and humankind. They have hearts wherewith they understand not, they have eyes wherewith they see not, and they have ears wherewith they hear not. They are like cattle, nay even more astray; those! They are the headless ones. (Qur'an 7:179).

The Qur'an also refers to the breast that contains the heart as the repository of secrets. This reality is espoused severally in the Qur'an pointing out the fact that whatever is contained in the heart is known to Allah.

Say (O Muhammad) whether you hide what is in your breast or reveal it, Allah knows it, and He knows what is in the heavens and what is in the earth. Allah is able to do all things (Qur'an 3:29).

And whether you keep your talk secret or disclose it, verily, He is the Knower of what is in the breast (of men) (Qur'an 67:13).

The heart is further explored in the Qur'an in several places in relation to being diseased;12 hardened;13 sealed14 covered;15 divided;16 locked up to understanding and knowledge of Allah17 and constant remembrance of Allah.

The Heart (Al-Qalb): Its types and Connection to the Soul (Ruh)

The heart (al-Qalb) is said to be connected to the soul as an integral component. The connection of the heart to the soul as viewed by al-Ghazali is such that resembles the connection of attributes with the bodily limbs, or a machine with the operator, or a house with its inmates.18 To some other scholars, the exact nature of this connection is unknown. In spite of the above, the heart is divided into three types which have similarity with the descriptions of the three levels of the soul.19 These are the healthy heart, the dead heart, and the sick or defective heart.20

1. The Healthy Heart (Al-Qalbu's Salim)

This is a pure heart that has only love for and fears of Allah. It loves those things that Allah loves, and hates that which He hates. This type of heart is healthy, sound and pure because it is free from any desires that oppose the commands of Allah and from any doubt that contradicts what He reveals. This heart submits completely and relies on Allah alone. Thus it is living, humble, soft and gentle.21 This is likened to the tranquil soul (nafsu'l Mutma'innah) 22

By way of description, Ibn Qayyim states:

A heart that is full of belief and guided by its light. It gets the veil of sensual pleasures cleared away the light of belief is luminous in this heart. Its luminosity has a glow that may burn the devil when he approaches it. Such a person looks like the sky that is guarded by stars which cause devils to burn if they exceed them.23

The Qur'an therefore affirms that the healthy heart will be of great benefit to its owner in the Day of Judgement.

The Day when there will not benefit (anyone) wealth or children, but only one who comes to Allah with a sound heart. (Qur'an 26:88-89)

For more understanding, Zarabozo has highlighted some basic signs with which the healthy heart is indicated. The signs include: 24

1. Considering oneself as belonging to the next world and not this world eager to reach the hereafter.
2. Being upset after committing a sin, until repentance is complete.
3. Teaching unhappy and discontent at missing daily recitation of Qur'an or remembering Allah through praising and supplicating into Him.
4. Finding the pleasure of worshiping Allah more satisfying than any other pleasure.
5. Finding that worldly worries and concerns are absent when in a state of prayer.
6. Trying to use every moment wisely instead of wasting time.

2. The Dead Heart (Al-Qalbu'l Mayyit)

This type of heart is the direct opposite of the healthy heart as it has no life. It neither recognizes its Lord nor worships Him. Hence it is ignorant of its Creator.25 It follows its whims and desires and is immersed in worldly pleasures. It also engages in acts that it loves regardless of whether Allah loves those acts or not. This type of heart is similar to the commanding soul (nafsu'l ammarah).26

It is a dreary and harsh heart that worships other than Allah with love piety and hope.27 As such when the name of Allah is mentioned or the Qur'an is recited; this type of heart reacts with aversion.

And when Allah is mentioned alone, the hearts of those who do not believe in the hereafter shrink with aversion, but when those (worshiped) other than Him are mentioned, immediately they rejoice. (Qur'an 39:45).

This type of heart is further described as one devoid of faith and devoid of all good. With such a benighted heart, the devil relaxes his whisperings for he has already taken residence in this heart, a territory for him to rule as he pleases – in complete control.²⁸

3. The Unhealthy / Sick Heart (Al-Qalbu'l Marid)

This type of heart is between the first two hearts (i.e. healthy and dead hearts). It has some amount of life, but is also defective.²⁹ It contains love of Allah and faith in Him, but at the same time, it harbours a love of vain desires and the material world. It continuously wavers between the two conditions of safety and destruction and eventually become a dead heart if efforts are not made to purify it.³⁰ This is also likened to reproachful soul (Nafsu'l lawwamah) ³¹

A vivid description of this type of heart is given by Ibn Qayyim thus:

Heart illuminated by faith. Lamps are lit therein, but the shadows of passions and impulses remains. In this heart, the devil sometimes finds a welcome, sometimes rejection; but it is a territory he yearns for. The war waxes and wanes. People of this kind vary greatly: among some the devil usually defeated; among other still he sometimes (wins) and sometimes (loses).³²

The following are signs that indicate a diseased heart.

1. Not feeling hurt or pain when committing sins.
2. Finding pleasure in committing acts of disobedience to Allah.
3. Showing concern about less important matters while neglecting more important ones.
4. Disliking the truth and having difficulty accepting or submitting to it.
5. Feeling discomfort among righteous believers, but contentment among misguided people, sinners or even evil doers.
6. Not being affected by admonition.³³

Remedy for a Defective Heart

It is crystal clear from the foregoing that all acts of disobedience make the heart to be defective and thus closed to any form of guidance of Allah. Noticeable among these acts of disobedience which have the strongest negative impact upon the functioning of the heart are: unnecessary and harmful speech; unrestrained glances, over indulgence in food, and bad company.³⁴

Moreover, according to Ibn Qayyim the heart becoming defective revolves around two basic matters. The corruption of knowledge and the corruption of intent, which in turn lead to many destructive illnesses – anger and misguidance. He stressed further that misguidance is the end result of the corruption of knowledge and anger is the end result of the corruption of intent. These two diseases are the lords of all the ailments that afflict the heart.³⁵

Nevertheless, the cure for a defective heart lies in holistic purification of it. This involves among others, knowing the Truth and following it, seeking refuge with Allah and putting trust in Him; praying a great deal of supererogatory prayers; performing the actions of obedience to Allah frequently; praying night prayer while the people are sleeping; making the heart continuously stick to the remembrance of Allah; befriending only righteous; reciting the Qur'an frequently as well as abstaining from indecent actions and sins.³⁶

In furtherance to this, Aisha quoting Zarabozo in regards to purification of the heart explains:

And the heart cannot become purified until the person knows Allah, extols Him, loved Him; fears Him, has hope in Him and trusts Him and his heart is filled with these attributes. This is the true realization of the statement, 'There is no God except Allah'. The heart will not become pure until it loves, extols, defies, fears and submits to no one except Allah. And if the heart is pure, the limbs will follow and make the actions of the person pure as well.³⁷

The Heart (Al-Qalb) in Relation to Man's Intention/Actions

The relationship between the heart and the intention lies in the fact that the place of intention is in the heart and not else where. Thus, intention is referred to as the 'actions of the heart'. For the purpose of clarification, intention according to Zarabozo quoting Ibn Qayyim is defined as people's knowing what they are doing and knowing the purpose behind the action.³⁸ Al-Ghazali also explains that intention does not only entails knowledge of the action but will to do it and strength to implement

the will. Without knowledge of a thing, a man does not intend to have that thing, and without will, there is no movement of physical organs to do that thing.³⁹

As earlier mentioned, intention is the action of the heart, and thus it is more than the actions of the limbs. In fact, in Islam actions are not accepted or sound except with intention. The Prophet affirms thus:

Actions are only judged according to intentions and every man shall only have that which he intended. So whoever migrates for Allah and His Messenger then his migration will be for Allah and His Messenger. And whoever migrates for worldly benefits or for a man to marry her, his migration will be for what he migrate for.⁴⁰

Scholars have explained that the relationship between the heart and man's intention and action revolves around stages which the heart goes through before an action finally takes place. The first stage is when a thought first comes upon the heart and this is called *al-Hajis*. The second stage is when the thought remains in the heart known as (*al-Khatirah*). The third is the indecision stage whether to do something or leave it. In these stages whatever transpires in them attracts neither reward nor punishment. There is another stage which is called *al-Hamm*, a situation when consideration is given to doing something; and yet another stage is known as *al-Azm*, a stage of determination and will to do something. As for the stage of Hamm, the good thoughts are written down while the bad are not. But if one decides to act upon his thought, then if it is good it is written down as a good deed and if it is bad it is written down as bad deed. The reason for this is that having the will to do something is like doing it.⁴¹

A good description of the above assertion is contained in a Prophetic tradition collected by Bukhari and Muslim:

Whoever considers doing a good deed but does not do it will have one complete good deed written for him. Whoever does it, will have ten good deeds up to seven hundred up to many more multiple of that written for him. Whoever considers doing an evil deed and does not do it will have one complete good deed written for him. If he does it, one evil deed will be written for him.⁴²

The import of the above hadith is that one may have the intention of giving charity without having money to do so and thus have the reward of the action. Therefore, when the heart considers doing something, then the good deeds are written down while the bad deeds are not. However, if one decides to act upon his thoughts then both the good and bad deeds are written down because of the will power he possesses. This is to say that bad intention leads to bad deeds.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that in Islam the heart is considered the most precious part and divine habitation in man. However, quite contrary to what Allah desires our hearts to be as clearly enunciated above, Muslims in the contemporary period have lost the understanding of the importance of the role of the heart. Their focus is generally on actions or beliefs with little regards for the intention. Intention is indeed, an action of the heart and a purified heart is one that embraces virtues no matter how difficult and shuns vices no matter how alluring and attractive they are.

Nevertheless, quite disgusting are the cases of some Muslims who breed demonic and vicious hearts. For their petty material/worldly gains they can go to any extent at perpetrating evils, even to kill people indiscriminately. The Qur'an regards such vicious and cruel people worse than animals and hard stones. They are regarded as tyrants, oppressors, hypocrites and terrorists. This is because they have eventually turned their hearts into a shelter which the devil occupied and appropriated to himself. This paper therefore concludes that for the heart of the believers to be expanded and overflowed with divine knowledge, understanding, faith and sincerity, then, necessary steps should be taken to follow the guidance from Allah and develop noble and good characters through purification of the heart which entails the love of Allah, fear of Him and having hope and trust in Him.

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- Ibn Taimiyyah, Diseases of the Hearts and their Cures, Birmingham, U.K., Al-Hidayah Publishing and Distribution, 1998 p.5
- The different States of the heart mentioned in the Qur'an exceed one hundred and twenty in number.
- See Qur'an 2:10; 5:52; 8:49; 9:125; 22:53
- For example, read Qur'an 2:74; 22:53; 39:22; 57:16
- For instance Qur'an 7:100 reads: "Is it not clear to those who inherit the earth in succession from its (previous) possessors, that had We willed, We would have punished them for their sins. And we seal up their hearts so that they hear not". Read also, Qur'an 40:35; 47:16; 63:3.
- See Qur'an 17:46; 41:5
- See Qur'an 59:14
- Qur'an 47:24 reads: "Do they not think deeply in the Qur'an or are their hearts locked (up from understanding it).
- A. M. al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulumu 'd-Din*, Vol. 3, p.5
- The three levels of the Soul are: Nafsu 'l-amarah (Commanding Soul); Nafsu'l lawwamah (reproachful soul); Nafsu 'l-Mutma'innah (tranquil soul).
- See Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Ighathatu 'l lahfan Min Masa'idi 'sh-Shaytan*, Beirut, Lebanon, Dar al-Kotob al-ilmiyyah, 2004, p.13
- Ibid. See also, Ibn Taimiyyah, Diseases of the Hearts and their Cures, p.11
- Nafsu'l Mutma'innah is a virtuous self which differentiates between good and bad according to divine injunctions. It becomes completely dominated by inclinations towards piety and righteousness. It loves and desires goodness and detests evil deeds, so it rarely (if ever) responds to or complies with the urges to commit evil deeds. For more details, see J. Zarabozo, Purification of the Soul: Process, Concept and Means, Denver,
- Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Sahihul Wabil As-Sayyib Minal Kalim At-tayyib* (A Revision of The Plentiful Deluge of Palatable Utterances) Egypt, Dar Al –Manarah, 2009, p.44
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- Unlike the tranquil soul (Nafsu'l Mutma'innah), Nafsu 'l-Ammarah (Commanding Soul) is the evil self. It does not differentiate between good and bad. It therefore instigates people towards evil. This is the lower level of the soul which inclines towards the physical world and seeks bodily desires and pleasures. The soul is controlled by its whims and desires, such that it disobeys and commits sins easily. See W. K. Singh & A. R. Agwan, (ed.) Encyclopedia of the Holy Qur'an, Vol.4, India, Global Vision Publishing House, 2006, p. 1020.
- Ibn Taimiyyah, Diseases of the Hearts and their Cures, p.11
- Ibn Qayyim al-Tawziyyah, p.14
- Ibid p.15
- A. Utz, Psychology from the Islamic Perspective, p. 78
- It is self-reproaching soul that recognizes evil deeds, blames itself for wrongdoing and feels a sense of remorse. This soul also blames itself for not doing more good deeds. After recognizing their evil

natures and the wrong done to their own souls, people with reproach souls seek repentance from Allah and attempt to correct themselves. See J. Zarabozo, *Purification of the soul*...., pp.66-67.

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